

Big Names Running in United Russia Primaries

By [Natalya Krainova](#)

August 15, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova and tennis star Marat Safin are among the hopefuls running in United Russia's primary elections, a novelty for Russian politics meant to give an aura of competition to the State Duma elections.

The celebrities are competing against thousands of regular people who stand little chance of making it into United Russia's party list for the Duma elections because, as one party official said, the votes cast in primaries count for nothing.

United Russia's primaries, which run from July 21 to Aug. 25, are largely intended to ensure the rotation of lawmakers in United Russia and combat its image as the party of bureaucracy. But so far, the in-house elections have been plagued with typical bureaucratic problems, including murky rules and an overall lack of transparency.

United Russia is holding its primaries jointly with its new electoral ally, the All-Russia

People's Front, an informal group created in May by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who heads United Russia but is not a member.

A quarter of the seats on United Russia's list of 600 Duma nominees will go to the All-Russia People's Front, whose stated goal is to bring together nonpolitical groups to give them broader representation in the legislature. Analysts say the people's front is an attempt to garner more votes for United Russia, whose popularity has sunk in recent years.

A total of 4,700 candidates are running in the primaries, and only 3,000 are United Russia members, Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, who heads the party's Duma faction, [told](#) President Dmitry Medvedev during a Kremlin meeting earlier this month.

Even though the All-Russia People's Front will only get a fourth of the seats in the party list, it is putting forth half of the 226,000 vote counters for the primaries, according to rules for primaries available on United Russia's web site. The other half of the voters is nominated by United Russia.

The rules, however, offer no guarantee that winners of the primaries will automatically make the Duma vote list.

Neither do the guidelines say the winners will be those who collect the most votes. Duma Deputy Sergei Markov — who is running in the primaries — said the votes do not matter.

"It's participation that counts, and the number of votes is a less crucial factor," Markov told Kommersant in an interview [published](#) Monday.

"I do not rule out that in the next [electoral] cycle, figures from primaries will have a direct impact on the distribution of names on the party list," he said.

Markov did not say how the party list would be compiled for the December vote. Repeated calls to his cell phone went unanswered Monday. A party spokeswoman in Moscow said by telephone that no one at the party was available for comment on the primaries.

Putin and the rest of United Russia's leadership will have the final say on the party list, Kommersant [reported](#) last Tuesday. Candidates will be announced at a United Russia congress in Moscow on Sept. 23 and 24, which will gather more than 10,000 participants, the party's web site [said](#).

Between 15 percent and 20 percent of United Russia's current lawmakers stayed away from the primaries, mostly because they are near retirement age or have other career plans, and as a result will not be in the next Duma, Markov said.

Moreover, United Russia is cutting down on the practice of "locomotives" — political slang for popular faces, usually governors, who head party lists in the regions to boost vote results but give up their Duma seats after the elections, senior party official Andrei Vorobyov said.

"While governors often acted as 'locomotives' in the past, we believe that they will not head the lists in at least 30 regions this time," Vorobyov [told](#) a briefing Friday, according to United Russia's web site.

But the party's stab at rejuvenation largely amounts to shuffling familiar faces between regions, not ditching them in favor of new candidates, said Anna Lunyova, an analyst with the Center for Political Information.

"Old party members who lost credit in one region are running in another region," Lunyova said by phone.

Besides, there are still a lot of big names running in the primaries, and not all of them are expected to give up their day jobs for a Duma seat.

Prominent candidates who already made it through the primaries — which wrapped up ahead of schedule in some regions — include Mayor Sergei Sobyenin in Moscow and former tennis champion Marat Safin in Nizhny Novgorod.

Also participating are chess master Anatoly Karpov, cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, film star Vladimir Mashkov, and fitness club owner and socialite Olga Slutsker, party official Sergei Neverov said last month.

Among the 4,700 candidates are also Speaker Gryzlov, Deputy Prime Minister Sechin, Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu and Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Zhukov, party official Vorobyov said Friday.

Some rank-and-file activists have also made it onto party lists, among them a miner in the Rostov-on-Don region and two farmers, one in the Ryazan region and the other in the Kurgan region, Gryzlov told Medvedev at the Kremlin meeting.

United Russia first held primaries ahead of the 2007 Duma elections, but only members of the party or Young Guard, the party's youth wing, were allowed to take part.

The primaries have not been without controversy. The Prosecutor General's Office on Monday [threatened](#) Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin with disciplinary sanctions for running in primaries in the Volgograd region even though his job prevents him from participating in public politics. The two agencies are currently waging a turf war.

In Perm, former Duma Deputy Speaker Alexander Babakov came in a decent 15th place out of 40 candidates without even visiting the region, Kommersant reported.

Babakov, who ran on the All-Russia People's Front ballot, was a member of the ruling party's rival, A Just Russia, which expelled him for participating in the primaries. No word was available on whether switching sides would make him eligible for United Russia's Duma list despite the primaries' outcome.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/08/15/big-names-running-in-united-russia-primaries-a8924>